

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
IO-13 CU-04 SIL-01 LAB-04 NEAE-00 /073 W
-----056676 191352Z /45

P R 191100Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6523
USIA WASHDC PRIORITY
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0402

USIA FOR INA

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PEPR, OEXC, SY, US
SUBJECT: BAATH PARTY OPENS DOORS TO AMERICAN CONTACTS

1. SUMMARY: THE VISIT BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF YOUNG
POLITICAL LEADERS JAN 13-16 SERVED AS A HANDLE FOR THE
SYRIAN BAATH PARTY TO OPEN ITS DOORS FOR THE FIRST TIME
TO AMERICANS SINCE RESUMPTION OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN 1974.
BAATH LEADERS SAY THEY WANT TO CONTINUE SUCH CONTACTS AND
EXPAND THEM. THEY ARE INTRIGUED BY THIS DIALOGUE BUT STILL
FEAR US. THEY APPEAR TO PREFER A ONE-WAY STREET PROSELY-
TIZING AMERICANS, PARTICULARLY REPRESENTATIVES OF ITS YOUTH WHILE
CONTINUING TO ISOLATE THEMSELVES FROM OUR VIEWS. NEVERTHELESS,
WE HAVE BEEN PRESENTED AN ENCOURAGING OPENING FOR PRACTICAL
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FOLLOW THROUGH. END SUMMARY.

2. FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THIS EMBASSY REOPENED, BAATH
PARTY OFFICIALS WELCOMED MEETINGS WITH EMBASSY OFFICERS AND
THE DELEGATION OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF POLITICAL LEADERS
(ACYPL). ON JAN 14 THE DELEGATION MET WITH FAISAL SAMMAQ,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE BAATH PARTY SYRIAN REVOLUTIONARY

YOUTH MOVEMENT AND ON JAN 15 THEY MET WITH MAID AL-HASSAN, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE BAATH-DOMINATED STUDENT'S UNION AND WITH BAATH PARTY REGIONAL COMMAND MEMBER ABDALLAH AL-AHMAD. IN RESPONSE TO POLOFFS EXPRESSED HOPE THAT THIS MEETING WOULD BE FOLLOWED BY FURTHER EXCHANGES AHMAD SAID "THIS DOOR IS OPEN. THE AMERICAN AND ARAB PEOPLE SHOULD STRIVE TO GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF ONE ANOTHER. WE RESPECT YOUR OPINIONS AND THERE IS MARGIN FOR DISAGREEMENT. WE ENCOURAGE A DIALOGUE, FOR EXAMPLE, PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD INVITED SENATOR JACKSON TO VISIT SYRIA. WE WANT HIM TO SEE THE REALITY, THEN IF HE CONTINUES TO ATTACK US AT LEAST HE WILL BE BASING HIS OPINION ON DIRECT KNOWLEDGE."

3. SAMMAQ POINTED OUT THAT THE BAATH PARTY HAD PREVIOUSLY MET WITH AMERICAN OFFICIALS AT THE LEVEL OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL BUT THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THE PARTY HAD DEALT WITH AMERICANS DIRECTLY. HE ADDED THAT THE PARTY FEELS IT IS IN THE RIGHT AND THAT IT HAS A DUTY TO EXPLAIN ITS VIEWS TR ALL PEOPLE INCLUDING THE AMERICANS. "WE HAVE CONFIDENCE IN OURSELVES AND ARE NOT AFRAID OF ANYONE." SAMMAQ SAID HE WAS READY TO WORK WITH THE US EMBASSY OR DIRECTLY WITH AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS TO INCREASE THE DIALOGUE. HASSAN AGREED WITH THESE VIEWS.

4. BAATH OFFICIALS REITERATED WELL-DOCUMENTED SYRIAN VIEWS OF FOREIGN POLICY, US POLICY, ZIONISM, AND SADAT'S INITIATIVES. THE ONLY SURPRISE WAS THAT SAMMAQ PRESENTED SYRIA'S
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CASE MORE CONVINCINGLY THAN HIS SUPERIORS IN THE BAATH PARTY AND THE FOREIGN MINISTRY. ALL BAATH OFFICIALS GAVE DETAILED PRESENTATIONS ON THE YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS THEY CONTROLLED (SEP AIRGRAM) AND AHMAD PROVIDED A VIEW INTO THE BAATHI OPTIC WHICH WE ARE SELDOM EXPOSED TO HERE (SEPTTEL).

5. JUDGING BY THE THRUST OF BAATHI COMMENTS, THE SYRIANS WOULD LIKE TO EMPHASIZE CONTACTS WITH AMERICAN YOUTH. PEOPLE'S COUNCIL CHAIRMAN OF THE ARAB AND FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE, MUHSIN BILAL SAID SYRIAN OFFICIALS HAD FELT THAT RECENT SENATORIAL GUESTS HAD CLOSED MINDS, REPRESENTATIVES WERE MORE OPEN AND THE ACYPL DELEGATION WAS MOST OPEN IN ITS APPROACH. THIS SUGGESTS THE SYRIAN ARE WORKING FOR THE FUTURE AND A LONG-TERM GAIN RATHER THAN FOR IMMEDIATE RETURNS.

6. MEETINGS OVER LAST FEW DAYS WITH THE BAATH PARTY COMPLEMENTED RECENT STRESS BY FONMIN KHADDAM AND PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD TO CODELS ZABLOCKI AND WILLIAMS/STEVENS OF SYRIA'S DESIRE TO FURTHER DEVELOP AND IMPROVE BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH THE US REGARDLESS OF OUR DIFFERENCES OVER MIDDLE EAST POLICY. DEBATE OVER ATTITUDE TOWARDS US HAD BEEN GOING ON FOR SOME TIME NOW. ON OCT 31, THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL HAD A DEBATE OVER SYRIA'S

OPENING TO AMERICA (77 DAMASCUS 7065) IN WHICH KHADDAM EMPHASIZED THE GOVERNMENT'S VIEW THAT SYRIA CANNOT TURN ITS BACK ON THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WHICH SYRIA BELIVES CAN BE PERSUADED OF THE JUSTICE OF ITS VIEWS. IN SUBSEQUENT MEETING SHORTLY THEREAFTER WITH FIVE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL MEMBERS, POLOFF WAS TREATED TO THE SAME VIEW AND ENCOURAGED HOPE FOR BROADER CONTACTS SAYING THERE MUST BE EXCHANGE OF VIEW WITH ALL SECTORS OF SYRIAN SOCIETY INCLUDING THE BAATH PARTY. WE HAVE SENT THIS MESSAGE TO THE BAATH PARTY THROUGH EVERY CHANNEL AVAILABLE TO US, BOTH

PRIVATE AND OFFICIAL, IN WHAT WE HAD EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE UP TO NOW WAS A FRUITLESS EXERCISE.

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7. SHIFT IN BAATHI APPROACH MAY BE REFLECTION OF GROWING CONCERN THAT US AND SYRIA ARE MOVING ON DIVERGING PATHS IN THEIR MIDDLE EAST POLICIES. SYRIANS HAVE OFTEN TOLD US THEY WILL NEVER AGAIN MAKE THE MISTAKE OF BREAKING RELATIONS AND ISOLATING THEMSELVES FROM THE US. NEW OPENING AND EMPHASIS ON DIALOGUE MAY BE AN EFFORT TO BUY SOME INSURANCE AGAINST SUCH A BREAK. ASST MINCULTURE TOLD CAO JANUARY 17 THAT HE COULD FORESEE THE POSSIBILITY OF A TIME WHEN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO GOVERNMENTS

MIGHT BECOME EXTREMELY BAD. IN SUCH AN EVENT, THE AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER WOULD BE ABLE TO REMAIN OPEN, BUT ONLY ON CONDITION IT RETAIN ITS PURITY AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION.

8. THE OPENING BEFORE US IS UNIQUE IN THE HISTORY OF OUR RELATIONS SINCE THE BAATH CAME TO POWER. SOME BAATHI OFFICIALS
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APPEAR INTRIGUED WITH THE IDEA OF DEALING WITH AMERICANS. HAMID AL-HASSAN, WEARING HIS PEOPLE'S COUNCIL HAT, CAME TO AMBASSADOR'S DINNER JAN 11 FOR CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS. HE TOLD POLOFF THAT HE COULD NOT BELIEVE HE WAS STANDING IN THE US AMBASSADOR'S HOUSE. ALL HIS LIFE IN THE BAATH PARTY HE HAD BEEN PROHIBITED FROM EVEN TALKING TO AMERICANS OFFICIALLY AND NOW, SUDDENLY, HE WAS ATTENDING AN OFFICIAL US FUNCTION. (EMBASSY DID NOT SELECT PEOPLE'S COUNCIL INVITEES, BUT ASKED PEOPLE'S COUNCIL TO NOMINATE ITS OWN GUESTS.)

9. THE PICTURE IS NOT ALL ROSY HOWEVER. WE TRIED TO SCHEDULE TWO LEADING AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY EXPERTS, ZARTMAN AND PIERRE, FOR FOREIGN POLICY LECTURES AT THE USIS CENTER. WE WERE REFUSED JAN 16 WITH THE CURT REMINDER THAT OURS IS A CULTURAL CENTER, NOT AN INFORMATION CENTER. LECTURES ON POLITICAL SUBJECTS WERE NOT APPROPRIATE, "PARTICULARLY NOT AT THIS TIME, DEPMIN OF CULTURE AND NATIONAL GUIDANCE TOLD US. THE SYRIANS CLEARLY WOULD PREFER A ONE-WAY STREET, PARTICULARLY WHEN THEY CANNOT CONTROL THE PEOPLE INVITED TO HEAR OUR LECTURES. THEY SEEM TO BE UNCERTAIN ABOUT THEIR NEW POLICY AND ARE FEELING THEIR WAY. THIS SUGGESTS WE MUST APPROACH THEIR OPENING-CAUTIOUSLY TO AVOID SCARING THEM AWAY. (ALMOST SIMULTANEOUS VISITS BY PROFESSORS PIERRE, WILBUR, ZARTMAN, AND NADAV SAFRAN--LATTER THREE COMING ON THEIR OWN INITIATIVE-- HAVE UPSET THE SYRIANS. IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE WE PLAN TO PROGRAM ONLY PRIVATE CONTACTS BY VISITING POLITICAL SCIENTISTS WITH ME EXPERTISE.

10. WE HAVE COMMITTED OURSELVES TO ENCOURAGING CONTACTS AND BELIEVE WE SHOULD MAKE PRACTICAL EFFORTS IN THIS DIRECTION. WE WOULD APPRECIATE LEARNING OF YOUTH AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS WHICH MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN EXCHANGES, OR VISITORS TO THE AREA WHICH MIGHT BE CONVINCED TO STOP OVER IN SYRIA FOR DISCUSSIONS. WE DON'T WANT TO INUNDATE THE SYRIANS AND DOUBT THIS IS LIKELY
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TO HAPPEN GIVEN THE PAST RECORD OF AREA VISITORS PASSING SYRIA BY. WE HAVE ASKED JOE FARMER OF ACYPL TO CONTACT US WHEN HE RETURNS HOME AND BELIEVE IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF THE

DEPARTMENT, IN HIS DEBRIEFING, DISCUSSES TAKING ADVANTAGE
OF OPPORTUNITY AND IMPORTANCE OF RECIPROCAL VISIT BY SYRIAN YOUTH.

11. IN VIREVIEWING TYPES OF VISITORS WHICH WOULD HAVE THE BEST
OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLOIT THE BAATH PARTY OPENING, IT IS WORTH-
WHILE RECALLING THAT THE BAATH PARTY HAS ITS STRONGEST NON-
MILITARY FOOTHOLD IN ORGANIZED YOUTH, THE LABOR UNION, THE
PEASANTS UNION, AND THE TEACHERS UNION. A VISITOR FROM
CERTAIN AMERICAN COUNTERPART GROUPS COULD HELP US EXPAND THE
OPENING. THE EMPHASIS AT FIRST SHOULD PROBABLY BE ON YOUNGER
INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE NOT ASSOCIATED WITH ORGANIZATIONS CON-
SIDERED "HOSTILE" HERE.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: VISITS, YOUTH GROUPS, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 19 jan 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC00402
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780028-0948
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780146/aaaabmuk.tel
Line Count: 237
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 72ed3be2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 31 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3749613
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: BAATH PARTY OPENS DOORS TO AMERICAN CONTACTS
TAGS: PINT, PEPR, OEXC, SY, US
To: STATE USIA
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/72ed3be2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014